



Always and Forever

by Alessa

Chapter 1

Black Hills, South Dakota, 1877

In the rugged outpost of Deadwood, tales of the forbidding western forests were whispered among the townsfolk like secrets shared in the dark of night. It was a place where even the bravest souls hesitated to tread, where shadows danced with unseen terrors and the trees whispered deadly melodies to those who dared listen. But on a fateful Friday afternoon, as the chill of November hung heavy in the air, fate conspired against young Daisy Carson.

With a jolt that snapped the tranquility of the day, Daisy's dog—an oafish beast of German descent, named Toby—tore free from his leather tether, his clumsy form disappearing into the maze of dark trees that loomed before them. With determination fuelling her steps, Daisy found herself faced with a choice: to heed the warnings of the townsfolk and retreat to safety, or to follow her loyal companion into the unknown depths of the forest.

The aftermath of the season's first snowfall lent an eerie aura to the woodland landscape. The ground beneath Daisy's feet was a treacherous snare of mud and pine needles, clinging to the fabric of her calico skirt and weighing down the soles of her boots. Each step forward was a battle against the elements, as dampness seeped through the leather and chilled her to the bone.

Driven by an ardent resolve and the unwavering bond between a girl and her dog, Daisy pressed on. Her voice rang out through the silent expanse, calling Toby's name with a desperate urgency and trepidation. But her cries were met only by the haunting echoes that reverberated among the towering but indifferent pine trees.

As the sun began its descent behind the mountains, casting long shadows that stretched upon the forest floor, a sense of foreboding crept into Daisy's heart. The once-familiar surroundings now seemed alien and hostile, their twisted forms casting sinister silhouettes in the fading light. In the depths of the forest, where every rustle of leaves and snap of twigs held the promise of unseen peril, Daisy confronted the chilling reality of her predicament.

"Toby!" Her voice echoed through the forest, pleading for any sign of his paws thumping through the dense undergrowth. But in the vast expanse of towering pines, there was only the eerie silence that enveloped her like a shroud, broken only by the whispering of the wind through the branches above.

With each passing moment, Daisy's desperation grew, her senses strained to their limits as she searched in vain for the familiar sound of Toby's clumsy footsteps. But all she could hear was the relentless

pounding of her own heart, echoing the urgency of her plight. Her blonde locks, once neatly bound, now tumbled around her face in wild disarray, ensnared by the branches that reached out like gnarled fingers from the shadows. Tangled and unkempt, they mirrored the chaos that raged within her soul.

Daisy knew she couldn't leave without Toby. He may not have been the smartest of dogs, but he was sweet in his own way. Possessing a gentle spirit that endeared him to her heart, he's been a loyal companion who had been her mother's favorite before she succumbed to the cruel grip of fever. The memory of her mother's final days hung over young Daisy like a storm cloud, but it was a burden she carried with Stoic determination.

At only twelve years old, Daisy had faced more hardship than most children her age. The loss of her mother had left a void in her life that could never be filled, but she refused to let grief consume her. And now, faced with the prospect of losing Toby to the merciless jaws of a bear—or worse—Daisy knew she had to act.

People in the hushed corners of the town's dimly lit saloons and around crackling campfires that illuminated the faces of wary listeners, spoke of western forests with a reverence bordering on fear, as if using a normal voice would summon trouble. Kiowa and Cheyenne tribes ruled these desolate mountains that lay beyond the forest that had no name.

Beyond the sprawling wilderness that guarded its secrets with an impenetrable canyons and summits, the murky ranges of the western frontier loomed, with their jagged peaks, like a silent fortress. They were unreachable, as if an ocean separated them from Deadwood, and to the townsfolk they might as well have been a world apart, for few dared to venture beyond the safety of the outpost's borders into the untamed nature that lay beyond.

Yet, despite the ominous warnings that echoed through the streets, there were always those whose thirst for riches outweighed their sense of caution. Reckless miners, their eyes alight with the promise of untold wealth, would heedlessly set out in search of the legendary treasures said to lie hidden within the heart of the mountains. Tales of nuggets the size of goose eggs and streams that sparkled with gold dust beckoned them like sirens, their greed blinding them to the perils that awaited.

But western forests were not easily tamed, nor were its secrets freely given. When greed was greater than fear, no warning was enough. With each foolhardy expedition that ventured into its depths, another soul was claimed by the unforgiving wilderness, swallowed whole by the vast expanse of towering trees and treacherous terrain. Their names and dreams of gold faded into obscurity, never to be heard again, and their fates became little more than cautionary tales whispered in the dead of night.

For those who dwelled on the outskirts of civilization, the forest held fear and power beyond comprehension—a force that could not be reckoned with nor defied. No one reached the mountain if the forests didn't want them to. It was said that the trees themselves were alive with a malevolent energy, swallowing those foolish enough who dared to trespass upon their domain. To the people of Deadwood, it was a place best left undisturbed.

Daisy's heart hammered in her chest as she turned in a slow, desperate circle, her eyes scanning the tomb-like depths of the forest for any sign of her wayward companion. With each passing moment, the sense of unease that gripped her soul tightened its hold, squeezing the air from her lungs until she could scarcely draw breath.

Summoning every ounce of strength within her, she cupped her hands around her mouth, her voice ringing out like a clarion call amidst the silence of the forest.

"Toby!" she cried, and again, the sound was swallowed by the towering pines that loomed ominously overhead. Despite her best efforts, there was no response, save for the mournful whisper of the wind through the branches.

Undeterred, Daisy pressed forward, her determination unyielding in the face of danger. With each labored step, she trudged through the tangled underbrush, her calico skirt and petticoat stained with the mud of the marshy ground. She could already envision the look of disapproval on her father's face when she returned home, her reckless actions surely to earn her a scolding of the highest order.

But at present, Daisy cared little for her father's admonishments. The fear that gnawed at her insides was far greater than any lecture he could deliver. He'd think it foolish to follow the dog here, of all places. Dark forests were no places for little girls. All it could take was a twisted ankle or a broken bone, and no one would ever find her again.

As she struggled to catch her breath, Daisy bit down hard on the inside of her lip. A sharp pang of guilt pierced her heart. It was a good thing she'd stopped caring what her father thought, then. When Mama had fallen ill with consumption, he'd dragged his feet in sending for the doctor, worried about the cost. His reluctance to seek medical help for her ailing mother carried a heavy weight of remorse, a reminder of the choices made in the name of pride and penny-pinching.

Daisy couldn't help but wonder, in her darkest times, if she'd managed to convince him to send for the doctor earlier, just maybe... But now was not the time for regrets. With a renewed sense of purpose, she pushed onward, unshaken by the dangers that lay ahead.

And then, just as despair threatened to consume her, a sudden burst of noise shattered the silence of the forest, and a loud splash followed by the raucous barking filled her ears.

Relief flooded through her like a rushing tide, washing away the fear and uncertainty that had threatened to engulf her.

"Toby!" her cry pierced the forest as she hiked her skirts to her knees and bolted towards the source of the commotion.

But when the barking was accompanied by the unmistakable sound of laughter, she skidded to a sudden halt. Her heart pounded in her chest and goosebumps spread across her skin with a sense of foreboding that sent shivers coursing down her spine.

With trembling limbs, she pressed on, her steps hesitant as she crept forward, then pressed her back against the rough bark of a towering pine tree. Peering cautiously around its gnarled trunk, she beheld a scene straight from the realm of ancient fairy tale.

Before her, a wide creek snaked its way through the heart of the forest, its banks steep and threatening, lined with towering shards of slate rock that jutted defiantly from the rushing waters below. Perched atop one of these jagged stones in the middle of the creek, sat Toby, bathed in the soft glow of a lantern that flickered on the opposite bank.

But it was not Toby alone, crouching down, his tail wagging furiously, who captured Daisy's attention. Daisy watched as the water below him broke and in the swirling depths of the creek below, a figure danced amidst the shimmering moonlight, her movements fluid and graceful, her laughter filling the air, twining with Toby's happy barks. Daisy's breath caught in her throat as she watched, her eyes widening in disbelief at the ethereal sight before her.

The girl's back was turned to Daisy, her features obscured by a tangle of dark, wet hair that cascaded like a waterfall down her slender form. With each graceful movement, her fingers wove intricate patterns in the air—a mesmerizing dance that seemed to summon forth the very essence of the forest itself. And as the strange hum of magic filled the air, Daisy watched in awe as ribbons of light began to rise from the surface of the water, like golden fireflies shimmering in the night breeze.

Daisy's eyes widened in astonishment as she tried to understand the gripping spectacle unfolding before her. It was not merely light that danced upon the water's surface, but glimmering particles of gold dust, swirling and twirling in a hypnotic display as if orchestrated by magic. Each fragment and flake caught the lantern's soft glow, casting a radiant aura around the girl's slender hands as they wrapped with a fluid grace like a friendly cat's tail.

How was she doing this? Was it merely a clever trick of the light, or were the old stories true, hinting at something far more extraordinary? Questions tumbled through Daisy's mind like leaves caught in a gust of wind. The old tales whispered of mythical beings, guardians of the forest, who wielded powers beyond mortal comprehension. Their presence was a closely guarded secret, known only to those who dared to venture into the heart of the wilderness.

As the realization dawned upon her, Daisy stumbled backward, her heart pounding in her chest like a drumbeat echoing through the clearing. The snap of a twig beneath her foot shattered the silence like a gunshot and revealed her presence to the mysterious girl.

In an instant, both the girl and Toby snapped their heads towards the source of the disturbance, their senses keen and alert. With a bark of alarm, Toby bounded off the rocks and towards the safety of the bank, his loyal instincts driving him to protect his mistress from any potential threat. But the girl remained motionless, her gaze fixed upon the forest, as if she could see through the trees... as if she could see through Daisy.

Toby had sniffed Daisy out and galloped up to her, planting his muddy paws on her skirt, his fur soaked through. With a trembling hand, Daisy reached out to grasp Toby's collar, tying the lead tightly around

it. The familiar weight of the lead offered a reassuring anchor in the midst of the swirling uncertainty. She had no desire to linger in this place of mystery and enchantment, her instincts urging her to flee before it was too late.

But before she could make her escape, a voice shattered the stillness of the gathering darkness, its melodic tones ringing out like a bell through the silent expanse of the mountain.

"I like your dog."

The words hung in the air, unanswered. The lingering notes of a haunting melody, caught Daisy off guard and left her at a loss. She swallowed hard, the dryness of her mouth suddenly all too apparent as she struggled to find her voice amidst the pressing fear.

As if sensing her discomfort, the girl pressed on, her voice cutting through the forest like a sharp axe through wood. "It'll be dark before you know it," she remarked casually, her tone betraying none of the otherworldly power that seemed to emanate from her very being. "Do you have a light?"

Daisy hesitated, her mind racing as she weighed her options. Should she trust this mysterious stranger, or was it wiser to keep her distance? With a sense of trepidation, she screwed her eyes shut and shook her head against the unknown forces that threatened to engulf her. But even though she was hidden from the girl's line of sight by the trees, the girl could still see her. Was she some sort of witch, Daisy pondered.

Like a small child in defiance against the unknown forces that threatened to engulf her, Daisy let out a whimper. A nagging doubt lingered in the back of her mind, whispering of possibilities too fantastical to comprehend.

Just then, Toby's bark shattered the tense silence, jolting Daisy back to reality with a start. Opening her eyes, she found herself confronted with a sight that defied all logic and reason. Before her, a bright cloud of golden dust swirled and danced in the air, its ethereal glow casting a warm radiance that illuminated the darkness like a beacon of hope in the night.

Her stomach churned with fear and wonder as she beheld the bewitching spectacle before her. There was something undeniably beautiful about it, a strange allure that drew her in despite her instincts screaming for caution. It reminded her of a golden dust devil, twisting and turning with a grace that bordered on the sublime.

"That'll guide you to the edge of the forest," the girl's voice rang out from the darkness, her words carrying a sense of reassurance.

A sound of splashing water suddenly emerged behind her. As Daisy turned to peer around the tree, her eyes met those of the girl for the first time. She found herself transfixed by the sight before her.

Around the same age as Daisy herself, the girl stood before her in a dress unlike any Daisy had ever seen. It clung to her slender form like a delicate cobweb spun from the purest snowflakes, its ethereal silk willowing around her in a gentle breeze that seemed to whisper secrets of ages long past. Despite

the chill that hung heavy in the November air, the girl's loose wrap left her arms and shoulders bare, the scant material barely reaching down to her thighs as if daring the biting cold with its unearthly grace.

She had dark locks. Wet and untamed, they cascaded in unruly ropes down to her waist, wild and unbound by the constraints of braids or ribbons. Her eyes, large and luminous, gleamed with a verdant hue that seemed to pierce straight through to Daisy's soul. Peering into their emerald depths, one could notice specks of gold dancing like stars scattered across the midnight sky. And beneath her gold-speckled eyes, a small, pink button of a nose dared the frost to bite its tip, while her lips unfurled like the tender petals of a rose.

But it was not the girl's striking features alone that set Daisy's heart aflutter. No, it was the otherworldly luminescence of her bare skin that truly captivated her attention. The golden sheen adorned her limbs like a mantle of stardust sprinkled by the hand of some celestial artist. Flecks of gold glistened in the lantern light, casting an enchanting glow upon her exposed form, while long, shimmering stripes traced a path down her back like molten rivers of liquid gold.

For a long moment, Daisy found herself transfixed by the sight before her. The sheer magic exuded by the little girl standing before her overwhelmed her senses, rendering her eyes blind and her voice mute. For in the heart of the forest, amidst the swirling mists of mystery and enchantment, she had stumbled upon a being whose very existence defied explanation—a creature of beauty and wonder, bound to the earth yet touched by the magic of the heavens.

The girl's gaze met Daisy's, and in that fleeting moment of connection, Daisy felt herself shiver. Her breath caught in her throat as she pressed herself against the rough bark of the tree. There was something in those emerald eyes that sent her heart racing.

"You should go," the girl spoke beside Daisy, her voice barely more than a breath on the wind. And as if in agreement, the cloud of golden dust shimmered and danced in the air, its golden glow casting a warm radiance that seemed to beckon Daisy homeward.

Obedying without question, Daisy's fingers tightening around Toby's lead as she followed the guiding light through the tangled maze of pines. Each step forward was a path leading her away from the strange girl, guided by the flickering glow that led her ever closer to the safety of home.

Chapter 2

As she emerged from the cold embrace of the trees, Daisy watched in awe as the cloud of golden dust transformed before her very eyes, folding itself into a ribbon of light that shimmered like a thousand stars against the backdrop of the night sky.

And then, with a sudden burst of speed that left her breathless with wonder, the ribbon sped off into the depths of the forest, disappearing from her sight. Left standing alone, Daisy could only stare in disbelief. With a mind in turmoil, she was left struggling to make sense of the fantastical events that had just unfolded before her eyes.

She knew with a certainty that what she had witnessed was real—that the girl with the eyes of emerald and the skin of gold was no mere figment of her imagination, but a living, breathing creature of magic and mystery.

Which meant...

She didn't know what it meant, she told herself firmly. She clenched her jaw, a determined resolve settling over her like a cloak of steel. With each purposeful step, she marched down the familiar road that led to their humble cabin. Try as she might to push aside the lingering sense of unease that gnawed at her insides, Daisy couldn't shake the feeling that something profound had occurred amidst the shadows of the trees.

A solitary candle flickered in the window, casting a warm glow that beckoned Daisy forward. Through the worn curtains, she caught a glimpse of her father's silhouette, the familiar sight of him with a bottle raised to his lips like a ghost of times gone by. It was a scene she had witnessed all too often—a reminder of the pain and sorrow that had haunted their lives since Mama's passing.

With a heavy heart, Daisy led Toby to the barn, where the comforting presence of her father's horse and their milk cow, Bella, awaited. Shutting the door behind them, she spared a moment to smooth a hand over her hair. It must have looked like a complete mess, and it was a futile attempt to regain some semblance of composure.

Taking a deep breath, Daisy steeled herself for what lay beyond the rough-hewn cabin door. With a steady hand, she pushed it open. The creak of wood echoed through the stillness of the night. As she stepped inside, the warmth of the fire washed over her, enveloping her in a glow of routine amidst the chaos of the outside world.

"Where've you been?" her father slurred. "Where's my dinner?"

"I'm sorry, Papa," she said. "Toby got away from me. I had to chase after him."

Despair settled heavily upon Daisy's shoulders as she surveyed the scene before her. The flickering candlelight cast long shadows across the worn wooden floor; the faint aroma of whiskey mingled with the scent of desperation that hung heavy in the air.

Her father sat slumped by the window, a nearly empty bottle of whiskey clutched in his trembling hand. The telltale signs of a trip to town were plain to see upon his weathered face, leaving Daisy to wonder whether he had squandered their paltry fortune on spirits or had, perhaps, spared a thought to leave her enough for the flour and salt pork she needed?

But such hopes proved futile in the face of harsh reality. Mr. Reed, the proprietor of the general store, had long since barred his door to credit, his patience worn thin by the endless cycle of promises broken

and debts unpaid. And with her father's penchant for drink draining what little gold they managed to glean from the unforgiving creeks, the prospect of survival through the harsh winter months grew ever more precarious with each passing day.

With a heavy heart, Daisy turned her attention to the task at hand. Her fingers kneaded the dough, folding it eight times, just as Mama had taught her. The scant handful of biscuits she would bake would have to serve as their meal for the night.

Getting through this winter seemed harder every day. By next week, there wouldn't be a cup of flour to be found. There hadn't been salt in the house for weeks, and the last time they'd had a pig to butcher, her Mama was still alive. The cupboards were bare, save for a few scant remnants of flour and salt pork, and the specter of hunger loomed large on the horizon.

With a sigh, Daisy placed the biscuits and salt pork on the cast iron griddle and set it in the oven, the rhythmic sizzle of cooking meat filling the silence of the cabin like a reminder of hard times ahead. Beside her, her father sat in forlorn silence, his gaze fixed on some distant point beyond the windowpane. Lost in his own distant world of regret, he hardly ever acknowledged Daisy's presence.

A few quiet minutes passed, and Daisy found herself lost in thought. There was no escape from what she had witnessed in the forest. Her mind was still spinning from the encounter, and the image of the golden girl burned into her consciousness like a brand upon her soul.

"It's ready, Papa," Daisy said, setting a plate on the rough-hewn table.

Her father grunted in response, his movements sluggish as he rose from his seat and shuffled over to the head of the table. With a hunger born of necessity rather than desire, he devoured his meal with a speed that left Daisy scarcely able to draw breath. He ate deliberately, with his eyes fixed upon the food as if it were his last hope in a world grown cold and unforgiving.

And then, just as quickly as he had appeared, he was gone. Retreating to the solitude of his bedroom, he departed without so much as a word of thanks or recognition. Daisy watched him go before clearing away the remnants of their paltry supper.

But Daisy was not one to dwell on matters that could not be changed. With a quiet determination of her tender years, she waited until her father's snores echoed through the cabin, and only after he had succumbed to the oblivion of sleep, did she dare to steal away into the night. With a bundle of scraps gathered in the folds of her pinafore, she tiptoed her way to the sanctuary of the barn.

Toby greeted her with an eager wag of his tail, prancing back and forth when he smelled the food. His eyes alighted with anticipation as soon as he saw the lean offerings she had brought. With gentle hands, Daisy fed him his measly dinner, his warmth beside her the only balm against the harsh realities of their existence.

As the night wore on and the cold seeped into her bones, Daisy remained by Toby's side. Her thoughts drifted like shadows in the moonlight, never finding a safe harbor to anchor. In the quiet seclusion of the barn, with Toby's head resting in her lap, she found a fleeting sense of peace. She knew she

wouldn't be missed, because her father had forgotten how to miss people... or maybe he'd never learned.

Chapter 3

As the second snow of winter descended upon the rugged landscape and blanketed the world in a frosty embrace, Daisy found herself consumed by the relentless demands of survival. Long days were spent toiling away on the gold claim, with only her father's silent and stony presence by her side.

In the isolation of the wilderness, Toby remained her only faithful companion. His loyal friendship was the only source of comfort to Daisy, amidst the unrelenting cold. But even as she worked tirelessly to eke out a slim existence from the frozen earth, she knew that the true battle lay not in the depths of the gold-laden soil, but in the shadowy recesses of her own heart, where an image of the strange girl from the forest called to her every night.

To make ends meet, Daisy took in sewing from some of the ladies in town. Her nimble fingers worked tirelessly day and night to chip away at the mountain of debt that loomed over them like a specter of doom. Mr. Reed, the stern proprietor of the general store, proved to be an unexpected ally in her time of need, his kindness extending beyond mere business transactions as he slipped her small packets of food when she least expected it.

But it was the occasional acts of generosity from their neighbors that truly warmed Daisy's heart on the coldest of winter nights. Mrs. O'Leary, the kindly soul who lived with her husband, the mining camp's carpenter, in the house up the hill from theirs, would often take pity on Daisy, offering her an egg or two from their modest flock of hens, or even a beef bone to make a hearty stock to stave off the chill.

In the face of such small but meaningful gestures of charity, Daisy found the strength to carry on. Her spirits gradually lifted by the knowledge that she was not alone in her struggles.

But the winter's icy grip lingered long in the Black Hills that year. Its cruel embrace refused to loosen until March had come and gone, leaving in its wake a landscape transformed by the slow thaw of spring. As the last remnants of snow melted away, they revealed the vibrant greenery of the mountain forests beneath, and Daisy breathed a sigh of relief at its sight, grateful for the promise of warmer days ahead. Seeing the spring arrive always felt like a miracle that they made it through another year.

But even as the thin rays of sunshine warmed her chilled skin, Daisy could not shake the memory of the bitter hardships endured during the long winter months. Hunger gnawed at her belly like a relentless beast. Death lurked in the streets of the settlement, and sickness stalked every corner of their humble cabin. Stretching their meager rations as far as she could, Daisy turned a deaf ear to her father's angry grumbles, her focus fixed on the daunting task of survival.

In the quiet solitude of the night, as she lay awake upon her threadbare cot, Daisy's thoughts drifted to the future—bleak and uncertain, yet tinged with a flicker of hope. The pains in her stomach had become a familiar companion, but the sight of her own bones protruding beneath her skin served as a cruel reminder of the un pitying reality they faced. She knew deep in her heart that she would not survive another winter like the last, her frail form ill-equipped to withstand the brutal whims of fate. It never bothered her because she knew her mother awaited her with open arms wherever she was, but she made a plan nonetheless.

With a determination born of desperation, Daisy constructed a scheme to secure their future in a world grown cold and unforgiving. One afternoon, when her father was lost in the depths of his bottle, Daisy seized her chance, and with Toby by her side, she slipped out to the barn, where her father kept his mining pans and tools of the trade.

Gathering what supplies she could carry—a blanket, a flint for starting fires, and a small supply of dried meat, she steeled herself for the journey ahead. With each step into the unknown, her heart pounded while her desperation drove her forward despite the daunting odds stacked against her.

"Find the creek, boy," Daisy's whispered plea to Toby hung in the crisp forest air.

Though some might have deemed it foolish to entrust her fate to the instincts of a dog, Daisy had no other guide to rely upon in this vast wilderness. The memory of the shimmering golden light that had once led her through the darkness had faded into the recesses of her mind, leaving her to navigate the tangled maze of trees and undergrowth with only Toby's keen sense of smell to guide them.

With his nose to the ground and a boundless enthusiasm, Toby surged forward, pulling Daisy along in his wake. Through thickets and brambles, across streams and muddy banks, they pressed ever onward, their footsteps muffled by the soft carpet of pine needles beneath their feet.

At times, it felt as though they walked for hours, the dense foliage of the forest closing in around them like a suffocating embrace. Daisy's heart clenched with each passing moment, her senses alert for any sign of the elusive creek that had once been their salvation.

There were moments of doubt, moments when Daisy feared they had lost their way, retracing their steps through the same tangled paths time and time again. But just when despair threatened to overtake her, the distant sound of water cascading over slate rock reached her ears, like a symphony of hope that spurred them ever forward.

With a burst of triumph, Daisy quickened her pace. Her spirits soared as she caught sight of the glistening surface of the creek ahead, but Toby was faster as he bounded ahead, his tail wagging furiously when he splashed into the cool waters.

Cautiously, Daisy approached the water's edge, her senses alert for any sign of danger. But when no threat presented itself, she allowed herself a moment of respite, setting her pack down beside the creek and untethering the pans from her rucksack.

Just as she prepared to wade into the water, a voice rang out, breaking the tranquil silence of the forest with its stark warning.

"Don't!"

Daisy's heart lurched in her chest, her senses jolting to attention. With a start, she spun around, her eyes scanning the creek's edge for any sign of the unseen intruder.

And then, as if materializing from the forest shadows, the girl flecked with gold emerged into view, her presence like a phantom conjured from the depths of Daisy's most vivid dreams. Her hair, black and wet and unruly, framed a face that seemed to glow with an otherworldly radiance, the specks of gold on her skin and in her eyes shimmering in the dappled light that filtered through the canopy above.

Daisy's pulse quickened at the sight of her. It was a strange and conflicting tide of emotions that swirled within her chest. Fear warred with fascination, uncertainty with a deep-seated longing that she could scarcely comprehend. It was a sensation both exhilarating and terrifying, as though she stood poised on the precipice of some great and unknown adventure, her heart torn between the urge to hide and the inexplicable desire to draw nearer. And though her instincts screamed at her to run—to flee from this enigmatic figure who seemed to hold the key to secrets beyond imagining, she found herself rooted to the spot, unable to tear her gaze away from the girl's captivating presence.

The girl stepped forward, her form bathed in the soft glow of the forest's twilight, and in that moment Daisy knew that she could no more resist the pull of fate than she could stop the stars from shining in the heavens above.

"Why not?" she asked, surprised at how steady her voice was.

The girl's head tilted. "It's not yours to take."

Daisy frowned. "Is this your claim, then?"

"It's mine to protect," the girl said.

"I don't see you working it," Daisy said, because the winter had taught her to be ruthless. The cold had settled in her bones and the hunger still gnawed at her dreams, whispering that soon, all would be lost.

"You got papers?"

"Humans deal in laws and papers," the girl replied. "We have no need."

There was a chilling note in her voice, one that made Daisy remember the tales of the western forests, the lost men who never came back, the whispers of the guardians of the mountain who knew the forest better than any human soul.

"So, are you going to stop me?" Daisy asked, defiantly propping her hands on her hips.

The girl's eyes widened. Even from across the creek, Daisy could see how green they were, like pine needles in winter, a deep, dark color shot through with flecks of gold that spoke of secrets.

"If I must."

Daisy moved forward, toward the water, and the girl's hands flew up. "Don't!" she cried out, this time with true fear. It made the hair on the back of Daisy's neck rise. "If you step into the water, you can't go back."

Daisy stopped, her eyebrows drawing together. "You're lying. Toby came back."

"Animals are different," the girl said. "If you want to see for yourself, you're welcome to step in. But if you do, you're ours."

Daisy shivered, stumbling back a few steps, while her heart hammered against her ribcage like a caged bird. With a heavy thud, she sank down onto the creek bank, the weight of dread settling upon her like a suffocating blanket.

What was she to do now, with the prospect of failure looming before her? Her father was useless. Now that the snow had melted, he spent his days in the murky halls of the saloon rather than tending to the gold claim that had once been their lifeline.

Winter would be here again before she knew it. The demon of hunger and cold loomed large in her mind. They'd starve or freeze, or maybe both, if she didn't do something.

Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, hot and bitter against her cheeks, but Daisy fought to hold them back, unwilling to show weakness in the presence of this mysterious girl who looked at her like she was something strange and fascinating.

There was something new and hopeful in the depths of that piercing gaze. Daisy saw not only her own fears reflected back at her, but also the unspoken promise of a destiny yet to unfold—a destiny that she alone held the power to shape.

"You have no greed in your heart," the girl said quietly, as if trying to reassure her.

Daisy sniffed, still trying—and failing—to hold back her tears that spilled down her pale cheeks.

"I'm... I'm hungry. I don't know what you mean," she sobbed now unstoppably and turned away from the girl to hide her face. "I'm not here to steal anything of yours. I'm sorry."

The girl smiled, and the twinkle in her eyes soothed the twist of despair in Daisy's stomach. "It doesn't matter."

Without another word, the girl dived smoothly into the pool of water below, disappearing beneath the surface. Daisy leaped to her feet, a surge of panic coursing through her veins. For a fleeting moment, she feared the worst—that she had been lured into a trap by this mysterious stranger, destined to be left alone in the heart of the forest with nothing but her fears for company.

As the seconds stretched into an agonizing eternity, Daisy's worries gave way to a mounting sense of dread. Should she call out for help? Or should she simply turn and flee, leaving this strange and beguiling creature behind? She hovered near the water's edge, but the girl's warning was fresh in her mind, and she didn't dare venture farther.

And then, just as suddenly as she had vanished, the girl resurfaced, her form illuminated by the soft glow of the afternoon sun as she swam gracefully to the bank where Daisy stood. With each step she took, Daisy felt the inexplicable pull of her presence growing stronger, like an irresistible force that threatened to overwhelm her senses.

When the girl emerged from the water, droplets cascaded from her skin like liquid diamonds, and Daisy found herself drawn irresistibly toward her, her feet moving of their own accord. This close, she was struck once more by the ethereal beauty of the girl before her—the delicate lines of her face, the golden freckles that adorned her skin, the shimmering strands of hair that framed her face like a halo. The weave of her dress was flimsy, but the cloth itself looked impossibly soft, delicate, almost wraithlike even soaked with water.

In that moment, Daisy was acutely aware of the fragile veil that separated them, the thin thread that bound them together in a delicate dance of fate and circumstance. But then the girl extended her hand, her fingers uncurling to reveal a treasure beyond imagining, and Daisy felt her breath catch in her throat.

Nestled within the girl's palm were four nuggets of pure gold, all the size of Daisy's thumb.

Daisy gasped. "How do you do that? What... what are you?"

The girl's lips parted in a smile that radiated happiness across her face. Reaching over, she took Daisy's hands in hers. Warmth spread through her, which was odd, because the girl's skin was cool and wet from the river water. She pressed the nuggets into Daisy's palm and smiled.

"You just have to do one thing for me," the girl said.

"What's that?" Daisy asked, trembling with fear and excitement.

The girl blinked and smiled, her eyes filling with a sly mischief. "Come back for a visit some time?"

Chapter 4

Daisy told no one. With each passing day, as spring melted into summer, she paid off her debt at the general store and then some. Her father couldn't be bothered to notice much. Lost in the haze of his own troubles, he paid little heed to the changes unfolding before his eyes. When she told him she'd taken in some more sewing, he believed that was the reason they suddenly had proper food and even a small flock of chickens.

Once a week, Daisy slipped into the mountain. She no longer needed Toby to guide her, for the forest had become her home, its hidden paths and secret glades known only to her. Most days, Nayla—for

that was her name—was already waiting for her, and with each trip, Daisy found herself drawn ever closer to the strange little girl.

Together, Daisy and Nayla would lay for hours on the sun-warmed rocks of the creek bank and gaze up at the bits of sky visible through the canopy of leaves that towered above them. They would skip the stones washed with the soft murmur of the water as it cascaded over their sunlit slates, or gather wildflowers and toss sticks for Toby to chase, laughing when he shook water from his coat all over them.

But amidst the laughter and the sunshine, there lingered a shadow like a faint whisper of doubt that tugged at Daisy's heart. One time Daisy arrived, and Nayla was nowhere to be found. She waited anxiously for her return until nearly dusk, her heart pounding with longing in her chest with each minute that passed. It was strange to think, but she felt more at home here, with Nayla by her side, than in her real home.

When Daisy returned the next week, worried that an empty creek bank would await her, a comforting bliss, unlike anything she had ever known before, settled inside her when she saw Nayla already there.

"You came!" Daisy beamed, happiness reflecting on her face.

"I'm sorry about the last time," Nayla said. "I had to attend a gathering."

"I didn't know you had gatherings," Daisy approached closer.

A shadow passed across Nayla's face that turned gold flakes on her skin dim like a desert sand when a cloud passes over. Nayla wasn't very forthcoming about certain things. Daisy knew there were others like her, who guarded parts of the forest, and even others who guarded the mountain itself. But Nayla would get quiet if Daisy asked too many questions, so she tried not to push her.

"Not always," Nayla looked away. "Only when the elders are concerned."

Daisy frowned. "Are you in trouble?"

Nayla looked down at her hands, biting her lip. "They... they're not happy you keep coming back."

Daisy's stomach sank. The idea of never coming back, never seeing Nayla again... She'd rather spend a thousand winters half-starved and huddling next to Toby for warmth.

"I didn't mean to get you in trouble," Daisy whispered. "I'm sorry."

Nayla shook her head. "It's not your fault. They think you're all the same. I thought so, too. Until..."

She reached over and took Daisy's hand in hers, stroking her fingers gently down the inside of her palm. Daisy gasped at the feeling it evoked in her. The touch of her skin radiated something unknown to her, something that wasn't warmth or energy, but a sensation Daisy couldn't describe. It passed through her fingers and into her body, weaving its way into her chest, her blood and into her heart. Every feeling in her body focused on that spot, and when Nayla pulled away, Daisy's skin glistened with gold.

"They can't do anything unless you cross the water," Nayla said.

"And if I do?" Daisy asked. There were nights when it was all she dreamed about. She dreamed of seeing Nayla every day, gathering flowers, playing with Toby together, splashing in the crystal clear waters of the creek. She closed her eyes and saw lazy days in the forest, floating in the water, talking, their fingers touching, exploring, their faces close to each other, until her loneliness became just a memory.

"Then you're ours," Nayla said. "Then you're mine. Always and forever."

"Is that so bad?" Daisy couldn't help but wonder. She thought she might like belonging to Nayla. For Nayla to belong to her. They would be inseparable, like forests are inseparable from the mountains, like the water is inseparable from the river.

"It's a choice," Nayla said softly. "It's a different life."

Daisy thought of Nayla spinning the gold out of the water, at the strands of gold dust that she'd twist into animal shapes, dancing them across the water to make her laugh. Nayla cared about her unlike any other person in her life. She was there for her, waited for her. She told her stories about the forest and the mountains she never dreamed about. Nobody understood her like Nayla and the new feelings for the strange girl confused her as much as they scared her.

When autumn draped its golden hues over Deadwood, Daisy found herself gripped by a sense of apprehension as the impending snows loomed on the horizon.

Sitting by their creek, she shared her unease with Nayla, while Toby reclined lazily between them, his tongue lolled out in contentment as Nayla indulged him with a soothing belly rub.

"The snowstorms will arrive soon," Daisy murmured, her voice heavy with foreboding. "And once they do, I fear I won't be able to return until it's spring again."

Nayla's movements stilled, reflecting a shadow passing over her face. The gold flecks across her nose seemed to dim for a second, losing their luster.

"I hadn't realized," she confessed softly, her eyes locked with Daisy's. "I cannot feel the chill of winter or the warmth of summer, only the touch," she explained, gently clasping Daisy's hand within her own. "I never want to lose this... lose you."

Daisy felt her heart quicken its pace, her cheeks flushing crimson beneath Nayla's earnest gaze. Never before had she experienced such emotions. Never had anyone spoken words that stirred her soul as Nayla's did, or made her shiver by a mere touch of their fingers.

"I... I wish it were not so," she admitted, her voice faltering slightly. "But the snow gets too deep up at the claim and..." her eyes suddenly brimmed with tears.

"What is it? Have I said something?" Nayla asked, all worried that she upset her friend. "Will you forgive me?"

"It's nothing you've said," Daisy reassured her. "It's only something I thought.... I wish the winter never comes, that there is only spring and summer so we could be together all the time, like this."

"But you'll return as soon as the snow melts, won't you?" Nayla asked, worry showing on her face.

Daisy threw her arms around Nayla's shoulders, and held her like a small but ferocious hurricane. "Promise!" she breathed warm against Nayla's neck, not wanting to ever part from her.

Chapter 5

As the Christmas season drew near, a chill settled over the cabin, both in the biting December air and in the icy tensions between Daisy and her father. It was amidst this frosty atmosphere that her father stumbled upon her secret cache of gold, hidden away in the sanctuary of her room.

His voice, fraught with fury, boomed through the timbers of the cabin as he unleashed a torrent of abuse against Daisy. He spared no vitriol, hurling accusations of whoring around the camp, stealing from their neighbors, milking his claim dry. There was nothing he didn't say to her. With each bark against her, Daisy felt the stab of his words like a knife plunging into her chest. And then, in a crescendo of rage, his hands swept through the air, sending the precious gold dust scattering across the floor like fallen leaves.

Finally, his anger spent, he dragged her to the freezing darkness of the barn, locking her away until the dawn's light would grant her reprieve. Alone in her prison, all Daisy could think of was Nayla, of the beauty of her gift, of the generosity of her soul, and the kindness that had been bestowed upon her.

Hours passed as she shivered in the cold and dark, with Toby as her only companion. Her father finally drank himself to sleep in the confine of the cabin, still muttering about how Daisy's mama would have been ashamed of her. It was in the dead of night, with the cabin shrouded in silence save for the crackle of the dwindling fire, that Daisy seized her chance for escape.

Moving with the stealth of a shadow, she slipped into the cabin on her tiptoes, her heart pounding with the significance of her decision. She gathered only the essentials—a scant few dresses, a bedroll, and her mother's cherished pearl brooch—the single link to a past that seemed increasingly distant.

With one last glance over her shoulder, Daisy and Toby slipped out into the icy night. The western forest loomed before them, near impossible to traverse in the dark, even with a lantern. Yet, despite the treacherous terrain and the oppressive darkness, there was no turning back now.

Driven by desperation and fuelled by a fierce determination to forge her own path, Daisy pressed onward into the unknown. She was desperate, alone, and moving forward was the only way to survive. As she stumbled through the deep snow, her heart whispered a silent prayer of gratitude to Nayla,

whose unwavering faith had kindled the spark of hope within her soul. It took longer than usual to reach the creek, but she got there eventually.

"Nayla?" she whispered in the darkness. "Are you there?"

The night was eerily silent, devoid of the usual croaks and chirps that filled the warm summer air, leaving not a single sound to break the stillness. Daisy peered into the darkness, anxious, her eyes straining. "Nayla!" she called, a little louder.

A light flickered in the distance, and her heart leaped as the dot grew larger and larger, until Nayla's small shape appeared through the trees, carrying a lantern.

"Daisy?" she asked with surprise and excitement in her voice. "What are you doing here?"

Daisy hoisted her pack on her shoulder and stepped toward the creek. One more step and she'd be in the water.

The point of no return.

"Daisy!" Nayla warned.

Daisy's gaze lingered on Nayla, the flickering glimmer of the light casting a soft radiance upon her features. In that moment, every aspect of Nayla seemed to shimmer with an ethereal beauty that stole Daisy's breath away. Her skin, kissed by the gentle glow of the lantern, appeared to gleam with a golden luminescence, while her eyes sparkled with a depth of understanding that spoke directly to Daisy's soul.

For Nayla had become more than a friend; she had been a beacon of light in Daisy's darkest hours. In times of despair, Nayla's kindness had been a soothing balm, offering solace and comfort when Daisy had felt utterly adrift. When hope had seemed but a distant memory, Nayla had breathed life into Daisy's life, infusing her with a renewed sense of purpose and possibility. And in moments when laughter had felt like a long-forgotten echo, Nayla had conjured joy from the depths of Daisy's despair, her infectious laughter ringing out like a melody in the night.

Moved by a surge of emotion, Daisy took a hesitant step forward. She waded into the river, her skirts clinging to her legs, the cool waters swirling around her ankles. With each stride, her heart beat a frantic rhythm against her chest.

With trembling hands, Nayla reached out, grasping Daisy's arms as if she couldn't quite believe she was there. Daisy had finally crossed the threshold of the river. She pulled herself up onto the opposite bank and found herself face to face with Nayla.

"I love you," Nayla whispered, her voice trembling from cold and excitement, the words hanging in the air like a fragile promise.

Closing the distance between them, Daisy's lips brushed softly against Nayla's, sending a shiver of affection coursing through her chest. Their embrace tightened, leaving Daisy enveloped within a sanctuary of love and warmth, where Nayla's arms became a protective shield against the trials of the

world. It was a sensation she wished to linger in forever, never wanting to relinquish the hold Nayla had upon her heart.

"I am yours," Daisy promised as they reluctantly parted, their noses bumping together in a tender caress.

Nayla smiled. They stood there, locked in each other's gaze, the shared breath of their words hanging in the crisp night air like a vow. At the same time, a magical spectacle unfolded around them. Golden light spun from the water danced and twirled, surrounding them in a glittering halo, while Toby leaped at the glowing cloud, trying to catch it with his teeth.

"And I am yours," Nayla said. "Always and forever."

The End